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CHILD LABOUR

Teresa ALBANEZ, Special Adviser on Child Rights for UNICEF, elaborates on the status of children around the world. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF estimate that 5 per cent of the world's children are suffering from exploitation. Governments do not do enough to protect the rights of children, who are used as labourers in every country of the world. More resources should be provided for primary education and health services to improve the lot of children and keep them off the streets. In certain societies and cultures, girls are more badly treated than boys. As well as doing all the household chores, they often become victims of prostitution. Ms. Albanez calls on all countries to respect the rights of children, which are guaranteed by a number of international instruments.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Perhaps nothing is more important to a child—after food, shelter, and a caring family—than enjoying the freedoms of a normal childhood. But today more than 250 million children around the world, in both rich and poor countries, are used as child labourers. Denied education and trapped in the cycle of poverty, their most basic rights, their health and even their lives are in jeopardy. Why are so many children so badly treated? What's happened to the international instruments that guarantee their rights? And what should be done to put an end to this inhuman treatment of children?

Our guest today is an advocate for the rights of children. She is Teresa Albanez, Special Adviser on Child Rights for UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund.

Joining me to talk with Ms. Albanez are Norberto Svarzman of Televisa of Mexico City and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

Ms. Albanez, welcome to World Chronicle.

ALBANEZ: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: We've just said in the introduction that 250 million children are affected. Perhaps this is an under-estimate. But the thing that struck me in the reports that I've been reading that UNICEF has put out is that, although a great deal of negative publicity has been given to companies like Nike, who are selling products produced by child labour, the actual problem of children producing things for export is very minimal compared with the much larger problem of children engaged in domestic industry. Is that so?

ALBANEZ: Yes. No, both ILO, the International Labour Organisation, and UNICEF coincide in saying that the number of children that are really affected by the exploitation of work in the export industry is very minimal. It is no more than 5 per cent.

LITTLEJOHNS: But it's still serious, of course.

ALBANEZ: It's a very serious problem, but it's not the most serious problem. The most serious problem is the thousands of millions of children that are trapped by poverty in the fields, in the streets of the big cities, and the small cities too, the biggest number of children that are exploited in prostitution, in the domestic household, and in the houses of all those that pay for domestic service. Those are the most difficult ones to reach, and the most difficult ones to investigate.

LITTLEJOHNS: What are Governments doing to prevent this terrible situation?

ALBANEZ: Very little. Very little or nothing. Very little or nothing. Because implementation of the laws normally goes directly to the areas in which children are paid for their services in the formal sector.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean these children are sort of hidden, so that Governments are not really aware of the problem?

ALBANEZ: Those are underground activities, and they happen in the streets without any type of control, without any type of vigilance, without any type of monitoring. And this is what UNICEF, and, I would say, the ILO, too, want to call the attention of the world to. I think the cases of the children in Bangladesh that are working in the sport industries, in the garment industry, are the ones that have maybe contributed to put on the table the issue of child labour. But that, I think we have to take advantage of that much bigger awareness that exists because of that to call to the attention of the world, to call to the attention of the journalists, to call to the attention of the research institutions, to put the eyes on the situation of those children that are being silently exploited day by day.

LITTLEJOHNS: We hear about the so-called "street children" in major cities, particularly in Latin America, and of course there have been cases where these poor little kids have actually been killed – in Brazil, for example. How serious a problem is this throughout Latin America? After all, you are from Venezuela, so you should know about it.

ALBANEZ: I think the problem is world-wide. But the problem in Latin America is especially serious, I would say. In the big cities – Caracas and Bogota and Rio – we see legions of children in the streets, day and night, selling small things, selling flowers, selling cookies, selling nuts.

LITTLEJOHNS: And little criminals too, I suppose, in many cases.

ALBANEZ: Yes. But, you know, the thing is that in a way it looks like society has become accustomed to that. And in many situations there is a kind of justification. They say, well, if they don't work, the families will collapse. So the work of the child is necessary for survival. In many ways this is true, but at the same time that is possible, that exists because there are many people ready to exploit children. And I think this is one of the things that the report wants to call attention to. Poverty could be called the cause, but it's the exploitation by the adults of the work of children. Why not substitute the work of the child with the work of the father or the mother? Or any other adult in the household. No. Because children are – they protest less, because children are more adaptable, because absolutely they are paid less. So it's because there is a really perverse condition in adult society to exploit children. And this is it. You know, this is what this Convention is all about, is to call attention to the fact that children have dignity, that you can be one year old or 18 years old or 15 years old and you have the same dignity that any adult has.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Convention on the Rights of the Child.

BASSIR POUR: A child is under 18, that's the definition of a child?

ALBANEZ: Yes. This is the—let's say the impetus of the Convention of the Rights of the Child is 18.

BASSIR POUR: You were just telling Michael that Governments do very little, and of course it's very important that they do more. What can be done against Governments? Because I see that you're not in favour of sanctions, which is the usual method of dealing with Governments in the Security Council.

ALBANEZ: Well, it's not that we are against, let's say, sanctions. We consider that certain types of, let's say, boycotts have contributed to raise the awareness vis-à-vis the problem. But of course we are not in favour of sanctions, period, like this. So we consider that sanctions are interesting, boycotts are interesting if they are accompanied with some protective measures for the children. We have examples today that show that sanctions—you know, even the threat of boycotting the exports of Bangladesh to the United States really put children in the streets. And they were like expelled to go into situations even worse than the ones that they were suffering by their work in the garment industry. So I think boycotts are a good thing in terms that this contributes to awareness. But boycotts, period, sanctions like that, period, without being accompanied by a constellation of measures, are a mistake.

BASSIR POUR: What other measures then do you propose for Governments?

ALBANEZ: Like sending children to school, guaranteeing some type of stipends that permit them really to remain in the school, and then to help the families. But you cannot just—

BASSIR POUR: I'm sorry. These are the measures that you're asking the Governments to take. I'm asking what can be done to make the Governments, to oblige the Governments to take these measures, such as education. That seems to be very important.

ALBANEZ: Well, you know, I think public pressure. How can you oblige the international community? How can you oblige Governments? How can I oblige the Government of Venezuela to pay more attention to children that are dropping out, that are leaving school in primary age?

BASSIR POUR: Exactly.

LITTLEJOHNS: But Ms. Albanez, there's no public pressure within their countries, is there?

ALBANEZ: Well, I would say that the most important thing in order to make the Governments take steps in order to change this state or situation is, you know, I would say the pressure of public opinion. Absolutely. You know, I can tell you, I was in the

Government, there is nothing that a Government, a cabinet, is much more afraid of than being accused of violations of human rights. And violations of children's rights, of human rights of children, are really a very powerful thing. We have to use it much more.

SVARZMAN: Public opinion has become a little bit callous lately, but is there another way to pressure, that you maybe have left out of our discussion? The question that the international financial organizations are starting to oblige Governments in clauses of conditionality to give more money for education, to promote education. That's one thing. But more important, my question then, I say the other problem that nobody likes to tackle, because you have a problem with the church, is the big production of children, the families have too many children, and there is no education for family planning and birth control.

ALBANEZ: Yes, well, you know, family planning is a long-term solution. Long-term alternatives. What are we going to do now, today with the children that are being exploited?

SVARZMAN: Well, the financial organizations—

ALBANEZ: Well, I will say that the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and other financial institutions are becoming much more aware that the problem of education is not building schools or big hospitals, that the problem of education and the problem of health is soft things, like the training of teachers, facilities for the teachers and the children. You know, some type of aid or stipends for children, to keep them in school and not to be sent to work, transportation, free books, uniforms, clothing, food. Those are the things that make children to be retained in school. It's not big buildings. Because when the World Bank gives a lot of money for the construction of a school, the only ones that benefit are the constructors, the engineers, or the companies that contract to build the school. Of course we need the school. We have to have better schools. We have to have better buildings. We have to have bathrooms, sanitaries and kitchens and everything. But what we have to have is good teachers, and the possibility for children to be retained in the school.

SVARZMAN: That's what I was saying to you, because now they are trying to put clauses of conditionality just to promote all levels of education. We start maybe with the education of the home, of the families, what they should do with the children.

ALBANEZ: That's true, that's very important. But you know, I will say that international financial institutions should give much more attention, for instance, to providing, and maybe to put some type of conditionality for, primary education, and not for secondary and university education. In Venezuela, for instance, we have a distribution of the budget which is absolutely erroneous, because we are giving much more priority in terms of educational resources to secondary education and to superior education, you know, to university, than to primary education, to preschool. And we have learned that the most

important years in life of children are the preschool years and the years for the basic primary education. But we have inverted the allocation of resources. We pay much more for the third level. The same thing in health. You know, we give much resources for very sophisticated high tech medicine and very little for primary health care. So it's—you know, we cannot see—

SVARZMAN: But there is a big offender in other organizations, like the United Nations, because nobody cares very much to defend the rights of the child. It's a basic human rights problem. And then since 1919 there have been seven major conventions regarding child labour and connected things. And nobody seems to pay any attention.

ALBANEZ: Well, let me tell you—

SVARZMAN: Except UNICEF maybe.

ALBANEZ: Well, let me tell you one thing. I think we are having a very good experience before the end of the millennium. There has been the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, there are many people that are sceptical about it. Say, well, you know, Governments have been absolutely hypocritical, they have ratified this but they don't have any intention to do it. Listen, I have seen—this is my work, and I have seen a movement of much more seriousness on the part of the Government towards this, probably—I'm not going to say at the beginning, you know, they did it because UNICEF was putting a lot of pressure, and we made, you know, a lot of fuss, a lot of noise about this Convention. And they ratified. But now they are being—you know, by the pressure of the NGOs, by the pressure of the journalists, by the pressure of many other organizations, they say now we are really obliged to do this. And we have seen progress, really. But, let me tell you, the force that has been behind the Convention on the Rights of the Child, I would say in a way, you know, conducted or accompanied by UNICEF, has not been as strong in support of the ILO Conventions. For instance, Convention 138 on minimum age; Recommendation 146—that is the complementary convention, the ILO convention on minimum age, they have not had the support, the public support, the institutional support that we have had with this Convention on the Rights of the Child. Now, UNICEF is very much committed to accompany ILO in the preparation of this new convention that is being thought against the most hazardous and intolerable—

LITTLEJOHNS: ILO is the International Labour Organization. This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Teresa Albanez, Special Adviser on Child Rights for UNICEF.

BASSIR POUR: I want to speak about this Convention. What's very striking to me is that the United States has not ratified it. It's amazing. Along with a couple of little islands, it seems to me. Why? Why isn't Washington ratifying this Convention?

ALBANEZ: Well, you know, it's Switzerland, too, the only two industrialized countries, Switzerland and the United States.

BASSIR POUR: Well, explain Switzerland's motives also.

LITTLEJOHNS: United Arab Emirates, I think.

BASSIR POUR: Solomon Islands.

ALBANEZ: The Cook Islands and Somalia, which is really not a state.

BASSIR POUR: Not a state, yes.

ALBANEZ: And Oman. Those are the only six remaining countries for this Convention to become the first universal law in history. I think one of the reasons for the United States not to have ratified—there are many. But one, I would say the most sound one from the legal point of view is that the United States is really a very clear federal State. You know, the legislation of each state here is very independent, autonomous. So for the United States to ratify this Convention they have to go through a kind of agreement at the state level. This is one thing. The second thing is that there is a very powerful silent majority in this country that are afraid of a Convention that could really interfere with the sacred right of the parents. Many people feel that there is not a need for an international convention to say how children should, you know, how parents should behave, and especially to acknowledge or recognize that children have the right to participation, that children have the right to choose their religion, that children have an independent thinking.

BASSIR POUR: So when you say a silent majority, we're talking about Americans? Or is this immigrants whose children actually do work?

ALBANEZ: No, no, no, no, I would say Americans.

LITTLEJOHNS: Of course we should point out that the United States has signed the document, thanks to the intervention of Mrs. Clinton, in fact.

ALBANEZ: Yes, that is the case. So the Administration has indicated the political will of the Administration to—for this Convention.

BASSIR POUR: But the states haven't.

ALBANEZ: But there is, you know, the Senate and the Congress, and there are, you know, many groups around this country that have expressed their inconformity with the United States ratifying a convention that recognizes and acknowledges that children have rights to choose religion, to have an independent thought, to free association. So this is a country in which, you know, it's the champion of liberties, of the basic freedoms, but at the same time it's a country that surprisingly is afraid of children exercising their freedoms and their rights.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about Switzerland? What's their rationale?

ALBANEZ: I think Switzerland is very close. And that's the case also of the different cantons, you know, the different states or provincial legislations that have to agree on the principles of the Convention.

BASSIR POUR: Is there child labour in Switzerland?

ALBANEZ: Child labour exists in almost every industrialized country. This is one of the myths that this report is trying to open for discussion. The idea that many people have is that child labour is a peculiar thing that only happens in the third world, in Latin America, in Africa or in Asia. The majority of children that are working, that are being exploited, are in those regions. That is true. But it's also true that there is a lot of exploitation of children, especially the minorities, the gypsies, the ethnics, you know, the Turks. All the migrants in the countries of Europe are really, really marginalized for access to many rights, and are really exploited. And this is something that has to be said. And this is something that, in fact, UNICEF makes really a commitment to speak out about. We are not an organization just for the third world, we are an organization for children. A new mandate of UNICEF was approved this year that says that we are concerned with all children, in developing and in industrialized countries. A different thing is where are we going to work? We are going to spend our limited resources in the developing countries, of course, but we are going to be able, we have to. This Convention calls on us for that, to call the attention of the world, and the industrialized countries, to the rights of children.

There is child labour, of course, in industrialized countries—by the thousands. A recent investigation in this country, in the United States, from the Labor Department, in a 3 day fast survey that they did, indicated that more than 11,000 children were working in exploitative conditions. In England, in the UK, the data are very striking.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many in England?

ALBANEZ: I don't remember at this moment, but ILO and UNICEF have some numbers here that—you know, a big number, about between 11 and 16 per cent of children under 13 are working in England.

LITTLEJOHNS: In England?

ALBANEZ: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

BASSIR POUR: Amazing.

LITTLEJOHNS: My word.

ALBANEZ: I can provide you—I'm sorry not to have very clear the data here.

SVARZMAN: In the situation of the children, which is in general very bad, your report says that young ladies, young children, women, are very much submitted to harsher conditions. Do you plan to have a different approach to little girls?

ALBANEZ: In the sense that little girls are much more exploited than boys. And this is true. Why? The majority of the children that are in domestic service are girls. In many places, in many countries, because of some type of tradition or cultural values, it is perfectly accepted and expected that girls remain in the household, that girls pay attention to all the jobs, to all the functions that have to be performed in the household, from early morning until very late. In Haiti, for instance, Haiti, which is in this hemisphere, in Haiti the expectation of the society is that girls have to do all the dirty work in the house—fetching water, cleaning the house, taking children to school—of the owners. Girls are being the most exploited, and girls are the ones that are highly exploited in prostitution.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tell us a bit about this prostitution problem. I mean, we hear about sex tourism and this kind of thing, particularly in southeast Asia. How serious is the problem, really?

ALBANEZ: The problem is very serious, and as you probably know, it was recently—this year it was recently highly discussed in Stockholm, in the conference on sexual exploitation, commercial sexual exploitation*. Going back to the issue of child labour, the number of girls in Asia that are being exploited in prostitution is very big. But I would say that it's very good to recognize today that there is a very favourable position of the Government. They have overcome already the stigma that they were feeling for many years that they were accused, but they didn't recognize it. Now they have recognized it and they are taking some steps—for instance, for facilitating the control and punishment and extradition of those tourists that have made sexual tourism a very big, big business.

LITTLEJOHNS: But it's too late, after they've already used the poor little kids.

ALBANEZ: Okay. But, you know, the thing is that today, the fact that some people have been extradited to their countries to be judged for sins or for crimes they have committed in another country against a child is a very important thing, I would say a very positive thing that is happening at the end of this century. That should not happen, but finally it's raising the consciousness. And there are many countries today that are--

LITTLEJOHNS: Norberto, I think I may have interrupted you. You were about to say something before.

SVARZMAN: Yes. Regarding the question of the women, little girls. Is it a cultural problem or is it also a religious problem? We have seen, for example, in Afghanistan, some people—the Taliban, mentioning religious precepts, are banning girls from school. But it's

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* World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Stockholm, Sweden, August 1996.

happened in other countries. Your report mentions India, for example. What can be done? Can you speak with the religious leaders about this?

ALBANEZ: I think UNICEF, in our action around the world, we speak with all the ones that can make a difference, with all the ones that can influence and impact in the change of behaviour. We have worked a lot with the Catholic Church in Latin America, trying to mould a much better understanding of the patterns of reproduction, sexual education, access to services. And I would say that in India UNICEF will do that the same, you know, talking with....

SVARZMAN: What about in the Muslim countries? Where the women are considered second class citizens.

ALBANEZ: Well, you know, this is—let me tell you. In Afghanistan, for instance, UNICEF stopped our technical and financial cooperation because girls were not taken to school. And we said our resources, our contribution, our financial and technical contribution to you for education is going to stop if you don't allow and give equal access to girls. We have had—as you probably know, in many African countries we have really supported many organizations against sexual mutilation, female mutilation. So UNICEF has really stood up in issues related to discrimination, to the recognition of the human rights of women and girls.

BASSIR POUR: Are you getting any help from the private sector? How they—

ALBANEZ: UNICEF, you say?

BASSIR POUR: Yes.

ALBANEZ: Oh, yes. Absolutely. You know, we—as an organization of the UN system our main contributors of course are Governments, but there are voluntary contributions.

BASSIR POUR: Well, more than contributions, I mean, as Michael mentioned Nike's role in using children, are you putting pressure on the private sector? Are they coming forward with promising not to exploit children?

ALBANEZ: UNICEF, for instance, has been accompanying the efforts of several groups, private groups, for the negotiation of a code of conduct in the—let's say in the garment industry, in the sports industry, and many others. We support that, and we welcome those efforts. Sometimes, you know, there are some people that are a little sceptical about codes of conduct, because they think that this is just for the gallery, that they sign this for the gallery, and people applaud and say that's excellent. We believe that codes of conduct are a very good practice, we stimulate them, we accompany them. And in the question of, for instance, it's not a code of conduct, but the support that UNICEF has been giving to Rugmark—I don't know if you would know what Rugmark is?

BASSIR POUR: No.

ALBANEZ: Rugmark is a programme that is being conducted in India with the support of UNICEF and ILO in order to certify that the rugs produced have not involved child exploitation.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Albanez, you've been a very articulate advocate, but that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition for **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Teresa Albanez, Special Adviser on Child Rights for UNICEF. She was interviewed by Norberto Svarzman of Televisa of Mexico City and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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